

Bob Todd of Fortress Press sent along a review copy of [this new volume](#) and it certainly is quite engaging. Even fascinating. The author is Professor of Old Testament at Marburg, and he isn't, by any stretch of the imagination, without ability. As I review it, I'll post here at the appropriate chapter segment and update the time stamp accordingly.

1- The Social History Method

In the first chapter of the book K. sets out his methodology. His opening sentence is programmatic: 'The Social History of Ancient Israel is treated in these pages as a discipline of historical study. At the same time, it is an essentially theological discipline, because the Hebrew Bible, as the fundamental theological document of Judaism and Christianity, tells the story of God...' (p. 1). Before diving into the deep waters he has just suggested he will navigate, he carries on in the remainder of the chapter with a review of Fernand Braudel's theories, a description of social history, and a very important overview of the history of scholarship, which concludes with something of a mini-bibliography of the most recent works in the field relevant for his present purpose. He makes mention, among others, of Oswald Loretz (who borrowed from Hans Bobek the concept of 'sharecropping' to describe '... the social relationships in the background of the prophets' social critique...')(p.11); Niels Peter Lemche, who is credited with 'a first, important impulse' in terms of research of Israelite social history; Rainer Albertz, Erhard Gerstenberger, Paula McNutt, Norman Gottwald, and J.David Pleins (p.12).

Fortress has made available this [first chapter in pdf](#) should you wish to take a look at it for yourself.

Part One: Methods for Studying the Social History of Israel

2- Environment as Living Space

Kessler here describes the fact that 'every society exists under particular geographic ... and historical conditions' (p. 15). These two aspects he calls 'living space'. The significance, or perhaps importance, of geography for social development is pointed out when Kessler notes 'This geography of small, isolated social units with very different environmental and agricultural conditions, in close proximity to one another had consequences for social development as well' (p. 17).

And now a complaint - or perhaps a simple suggestion. On page 17 Kessler (or his editor) makes use of the Greek word *p??e??* and does not transliterate it. Yet on page 12 the Hebrew word for 'stranger' or 'foreigner', *ger* is merely transliterated. These days there's really no reason, it seems to me, to transliterate. Indeed, if Greek fonts are available surely Hebrew are as well. That aside, back to the text.

Applying his sociological model K. writes 'Not without reason did the late biblical texts describe the previous inhabitants of Canaan in terms of long lists of peoples... Historicity played no part in the situations presumed by these lists. What was important was the awareness that this was a mixed population' (p. 17). More will be said about the thorny issue of 'historicity' in chapter four. Before that subject can be broached Kessler must discuss the material remains made use of to reconstruct a social history of Israel.

3- Material Remains

'We are faced with the question of the *sources* for a social history of Israel' opines K. at the opening of the third chapter (p. 19). He then describes the three types of sources we must make use of, in order of importance: 'material remains discovered by archaeology, biblical texts, and the conclusions we can draw by analogy from other societies regarding conditions in Israel. The sequence of this list is not arbitrary; it is conceived in terms of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources' (ibid.) so that, correctly, the biblical text is not considered a primary source for the reconstruction of Israelite society. Kessler goes on, quite naturally, to describe the proper use of archaeological materials to aid in historical reconstruction. He mentions the ongoing debate about 'high and low' chronology and then turns to a

discussion of the epigraphic material and suggests 'Especially important for social-historical reconstruction are the seals that contain not only the name of the owner, but also a title' (p. 22). In conclusion he notes 'Occasionally it has been asked whether it should not be possible to write a history of Israel from primary sources alone. As a thought experiment, it is certainly tempting. But I would not consider it an advance if we were to rely solely on the accident of archaeological findings and the restricted realm of social reality that reveals itself only in material remains to the exclusion of the theologically colored biblical tradition' (p. 23).

This sort of level-headedness permeates Kessler's volume and is his forte. Sure, the Bible is useful as a source- but only a secondary source. Yet to leave a reconstruction of the history of Israel's social institutions to the hands of archaeological fate is a significant error. Kessler has balanced both truths magnificently.

4- The Texts of the Hebrew Bible

The Old Testament is a theological book. That simple fact cannot be denied or ignored, and Kessler makes the point quite forcefully in the opening paragraphs of the fourth chapter- the chapter in which he describes most fully his viewpoint on the historical reliability of the biblical accounts. '... What is the value of biblical texts for the reconstruction of ancient Israel's social history? What has already been said makes it clear that this is to be judged differently according to the kind of texts in question' (p. 25). Or, as K. will say over and over throughout this chapter, each text must be evaluated individually. Yet, and here again Kessler balances the 'minimalist' and 'maximalist', 'In spite of their theologically motivated and fictional character, the biblical texts do contain reliable information' (p. 25). And here K. launches into a review of the efforts of the 'minimalists'. He suggests 'It is to the credit of the painstaking deconstruction of the 'history of Israel' in the works of Philip Davies, Niels Peter Lemche, Thomas Thopson, and Keith Whitelam, to mention only the most prominent names, that they leave nothing unquestioned. ... However, their treatment of the sources is not entirely unproblematic' (p. 25).

Mind you, Kessler is no maximalist either! In the remainder of the chapter he insightfully notes that the biblical text is as far from historical reportage as, for instance, Dostoevsky. '[The biblical texts] are more like a novel by Dostoevsky: all the characters may be invented, but we learn a great deal about social conditions in nineteenth century Russia. In this case we are not interested in the historicity of the actors, but in the milieu within which the authors place them' (p. 27). Tom and Philip and Niels Peter and Keith can speak for themselves, and aren't afraid to do so! But I think that there is much in Kessler's assesment here with which they would agree.

So what connection is there between reported event and actual event? 'In general, we can say that the narrative texts of the Old Testament are interested in events, and simply assume the circumstances within which the events occur as background' (p. 28). And, 'Social history is interested precisely in what is handed on unintentionally, the background situation' (ibid.) which can be gleaned, but only with the most extraordinary care, from biblical sources.

For Kessler, the best place to find such materials is the legal materials of the Old Testament since they contain information about Israel's societal conditions (if at times it is an idealized picture or not must be dealt with, again, on a case by case basis).

In the final segment of this very engaging, very important chapter, Kessler describes the difficult task of actually dating biblical texts. Again, each text must be considered case by case. One overarching rule of thumb is that '... the narrated time cannot be more recent than the time of narration' (p. 30). He concludes by correctly noting, I think, that the biblical text may indeed be used to aid in reconstruction of Israel's social history- if this is done with care and a clear awareness that the text is theological in nature and only secondarily concerned with circumstances.

The third piece of the puzzle (after archaeological and textual remains) which must be used in order to reconstruct Israel's social history is the subject of the next chapter:

5- In Search of Analogies

Kessler begins this chapter by correctly noting that '... archaeology and biblical texts present data, but the issue now is what interpretive framework do we organize the data [sic] within' (p. 33). This is, from my point of view, why 'minimalism' has the upper hand and why I have to reject Kessler's observation, in note three to chapter 4, that Philip Davies (and by implication, others who may at points agree with him) is 'bibliophobic'. Quite the contrary. It isn't fear of the bible that is the hallmark of 'minimalism' but the fear of falsehood (if that might be called a phobia). Organizing the data with priority being given to 'hard facts' rather than 'literary fictions' is, it seems to me, the only proper methodology. Indeed, in spite of his comment, Kessler too sees, as we have seen, the importance of hard data over soft.

As he fleshes out this 'search' for analogies K. correctly notes that 'The societies surrounding Israel were close to it in time and space, which is why we pay attention to them. But the extent to which they are close to Israel in their social structures must be examined separately in each case (p. 34). And, just in case someone misses his point of caution (i.e., in case someone wanders into the dangerous land of parallel-o-mania), he continues, 'Israel and Judah were always the weaker, dominated cultures. Whatever influence the dominant culture exercised, it did not make Israel itself culturally dominant. ... Israel developed not only by incorporating, but also by resisting, the culture of the dominant power' (p. 34).

Next, ethnology is on the plate and though valuable, comparisons it may offer are not probative. 'Thus we cannot directly compare African peoples ... studied by twentieth-century anthropologists, with the ancient Israelites and Judahites of the first millenium BCE. But on the basis of studies of recent African peoples, one can construct a theory about segmentary lineage societies and acephalic rule that makes it possible to gain a better understanding of certain phenomena from the period of Israel's development into a political state' (p. 35). And concerning sociological categories in general, K. concludes 'Although we cannot work without modern categories, our description must attempt to discover and depict what is different and strange in the society of ancient Israel' (p. 36) which is, by the way, exactly what I said concerning translation of the Bible the other day.

Part Two: The Epochs of Israel's Social History

The overview of Part Two contains a table which contains a bit of an error that will need to be corrected in future editions. That is, in dating the Late Bronze IIB age Kessler gives 1300-1150 BCE (which is obviously a typo since it should instead read 1300-1250 BCE). Indeed, his date for Iron IA is 1250-1100.

6- Israel's Origins as Kinship-Based Society

I earlier opined that Kessler is neither minimalist nor maximalist. In the present chapter he makes it quite clear that he is both- as well as being neither. He is, I think, best described as either a mini-maximalist (holding just enough maximalist tendencies to be one at least partially) or as a mini-minimalist (holding just enough minimalist tendencies to be one at least partially). Chapter six, which discusses 'the beginnings of something called Israel' proves my assertion as we shall shortly see.

Kessler draws quite heavily on the lists of Amenhotep II which he opines '... reaveal[s] a complex society' (p. 42) for his reconstruction. Naturally he describes the mention of the Shasu and the 'Apiru and suggests that their presence in Canaan indicates not a dimorphic, but a polymorphic society. I.e., there were farmers, Shasu, and 'Apiru inhabiting Canaan in the period under investigation.

In order to comprehend these groups the Amarna correspondence is called upon and which for Kessler implies that the 'Apiru 'are evidently not an ethnic, but a social category standing for migrants, people

who have unstable living conditions either for economic or political reasons. They lead their lives as thieves on the margins of society or, when more deeply integrated, either as mercenaries in the service of individual city rulers or as resident aliens with minimal rights' (p. 43).

Kessler then turns to a description of the Merneptah Stele and indicates '... that the 'Israel' on Merneptah's stele later joined or was dissolved into a group for which the God YHWH was constitutive, and gave its name to that group' (p. 45).

So, having dealt with the archaeological evidence K. next assesses the transition of society in Canaan into the Iron Age and the influx of new settlers and settlements, particularly in the central highlands, which he attributes to settlers 'from (semi)nomadic backgrounds' (p. 47). This all sounds very familiar and could have been written by anyone from Wright through Bright. It is maximalism in its tone and its implication. And this is precisely the juncture at which K. switches tracks and starts down the minimalist line. 'It is true that the archaeological sources, on which we have relied exclusively to this point, tell us nothing about the ethnice composition of the settlers' (p. 49). And that is certainly correct. The supposition that they were Israelite settlements, towns, or villages, is unprovable from the archaeological data. So how did they come to be viewed as 'Israelite'? Kessler writes '... after a certain time even some city dwellers considered themselves members of Israel. More than this, however, is not clear' (p. 49). Indeed it is not!

How, then, did Israel come to be a nation? 'According to the biblical picture, later Israel was fed from several sources. Besides the 'Apiru and the Shasu line, we have the indication that Israelite origins had something to do with the Arameans' (p. 50) and so we find ourselves back on the maximalist train.

The next segment of the chapter is devoted to describing the 'Structures of Kinship-Based Societies' and we know what kind of society this was because we have the book of Judges as it straddles the time between the occupation of the land (however that happened, and Kessler does not make a determination since the sources won't allow it) and the beginnings of the Israelite monarchy. And even that source [the book of Judges] is rightly seen by Kessler as a retrojection of elements of the later monarchy into an earlier time. Therefore, says he, 'The extent to which historically reliable recollections were thus preserved must be tested in every individual case' (p. 53) and once more we seem to be riding the minimalist line. This back and forth between the maximalist position and the minimalist position will probably annoy adherents of both camps. And perhaps Kessler is trying to steer a middle course. Or perhaps, and this is my take on his method, he is trying to deal as honestly as possible with the sources that he has at hand. 'The biblical material is thus only usable to a very limited degree, and of contemporary extra-biblical written sources there are none' (p. 53). Or, to put my own words in his mouth, what we have is all we have and we have to use what we have or we can say nothing at all. That, in short, is why I think Kessler balances minimalistic and maximalistic tendencies.

The final sections of the chapter are devoted to the social significance of family, clan, and tribe- all of which were forerunners to 'State' and all of which would later become components of the 'State' of Israel. '... whatever social reality was represented by this *Israel* can scarcely be reconstructed. ... [But] everything seems to favor the idea that Judah was not originally part of this entity called *Israel*' (p. 55). Whatever sort of society lay at the foundation of 'Israel', K. thinks it best to adopt the terminology of Rainer Neu, who called it a 'segmented lineage society' (p. 57). In other words, it's a society based on genealogy wherein all the members of the society see themselves as descendants, really or fictitiously, of a common ancestor. Readers of the Bible will know that even there, membership in this 'Israel' was fluid. One need merely compare the lists of tribes in Gen 49, Numbers 26, Joshua, and Judges 5 to see exactly how fluid it was.

Kessler closes out with a glance at economic factors (pre-State Israel was an agricultural and animal husbandry based society) and structures of leadership.

I've already noted that Kessler moves back and forth between a very conservative and very not so much conservative point of view. This methodology will again make itself known in the next chapter (as it has in previous).

7- Israel and Judah: From Early Statehood to Full Development

My remarks about this chapter will be fairly brief, only consisting of the simple observation that Kessler follows, for all intents and purposes, the standard and somewhat conservative line that the Old Testament is fairly accurate at least in the broad outline when it reports the history of Israel and Judah. This chapter serves as something of a bridge- though- as it is simply preparatory for the social history Kessler will offer in the next chapter.

I can't say I'm overjoyed by Kessler's willingness to take the biblical narrative at face value without much hesitation (even though he does mention in passing that neither the maximalist nor the minimalist positions are really acceptable). Again, the line he chooses is more, far more, maximalist than minimalist. Given his purpose, however, this is not so very surprising. It's a shame that he wasn't able to make use of Philip Davies' '[The Origins of Biblical Israel](#)', for had he, he certainly would have modified this chapter considerably. Or should.

Next, back to the social history.

8- The Formation of an Ancient Class Society

My misgivings, if they might be called that, about chapter 7 and Kessler's adherence to something of a maximalist point of view have been allayed in this chapter. Indeed, they have been set aside. Here Kessler does very fine work indeed and proves that he might well be on to something in his theoretical reconstruction of Israel's social history.

The core question K. addresses in this chapter is, naturally, indicated by the chapter title. How did Israel become a class society? From rudimentary beginnings, what took place that spurred the change? 'What was decisive, in terms of social history, was that the simple relationship between rulers and ruled characteristic of the early state gave way to a division of the ruled into classes with opposing social interests' (p. 104).

After reviewing the political background from the 8th to the 6th century, Kessler develops, in my estimation, a very profound explanation of Israel and Judah as class societies and the roots of the inevitable conflict between those classes. '... the poorer farmers [of those centuries] are falling into debt slavery to the wealthier and gradually losing their farms and lands' (p. 108). Arising in this clash of citizenry are the prophets, Amos, who never speaks of the oppressed as widows and orphans but instead these are '... small farmers who are expected to hand over more and more, and who, when nothing more is to be had from them, fall into debt slavery' (p. 109). Isaiah and Micah rail against '... the concentration of property in the hands of a few' (p.110). And Jeremiah and Ezekiel do the same, calling on the leadership to intervene on the side of the poor.

'The decisive factor in moving from ancient farming societies toward being class societies was the institution of credit' which resulted in 'fundamental contrasts in society ... between lenders and borrowers' (p. 111). 'The crucial change that led to the conditions evident from the 8th century onward is the transition from 'normal' indebtedness to an irreversible debt overload' (Ibid.) and in this Kessler most certainly must be right.

Kessler, in this chapter, brilliantly mines the biblical text for information which underlies the 'what and the why' of what the Prophets were on about. There were, to be sure, other factors such as trade imbalances and forced labor and warfare and population growth and the payment of tribute, all of which, we all know, fell on the backs of the poorest. But in essence it was economic injustice which lay at the heart of Israel and Judah's development into class oriented societies. 'Out of this bundle of

factors there arose, around the middle of the 8th century in Israel and at the end of the same century in Judah, what we can call an ancient class society' (p. 113).

'... the development became irreversible when the monarchy allied itself with the emerging upper classes'. Still it must be said that the prophets '... certainly cannot be seen as leaders of such movements or representatives of social revolution. But when the prophets show any sign of expecting a change in the situation through political action, their hopes are directed to the king' (p. 114-115).

This last point is very important- especially in light of the fact that the Prophets are often coerced by moderns and post-moderns to serve the cause of social revolution. In a key respect, the prophets were far too 'conservative' for such a thing. Instead, when they looked for an agent of change they didn't look to an uprising among the population but to the King who alone could effect change.

This 'royal ideology' is what Kessler sees as the thought world of the kingdoms in the centuries under discussion.

If the King wouldn't respond positively to the urgings of the Prophets to aid the oppressed, the next best thing was legislation designed to protect them. So, Kessler implies quite provocatively, monarchy preceded Law even though the king in Israel was never viewed as Lawgiver along the lines of Israel's neighbors.

And if Kings and Upper Classes still refused, dire consequences could be expected since, as the Prophets opined, God was on the side of the poor. Which takes us to the cusp of the next chapter.